

Fact vs. Fantasy — the Tet Intelligence Imbroglio

THE FIRST SHOT usually sounds loudest — and captures the most headlines. That's precisely what happened when several months ago a former CIA analyst charged in *Harper's* magazine and later before the House Intelligence Committee that authoritative CIA estimates of much-higher than reported Viet Cong strength in South Vietnam were deliberately suppressed just prior to the 1968 Tet Offensive. Another and important view of that imbroglio was offered early in December, but garnered nowhere near as much media coverage as Mr. Adams' sensational allegations. We believe that the issue deserves to be put in better perspective, that the other side of the story deserves wider dissemination. In that spirit, we offer below the remarks of DIA's Lt. Gen. Daniel O. Graham on the "Tet Offensive Numbers Rocket."

My purpose is to provide information on the intelligence aspects of the Tet Offensive and in particular, the allegations presented before the House Intelligence Committee by a Mr. Sam Adams, who charges that in 1967 and 1968 civilian and military officials conspired to suppress true intelligence. The truth, as he sees it, was his view of total fighting strength of the enemy in South Vietnam.

The validity of Mr. Adams' attacks on the reputations of individuals in CIA, in military intelligence and of other military and diplomatic leaders rests ultimately on the proposition that his figures were correct and everyone else's figures were "phony." The fact is that the opposite is true. Mr. Adams was quite wrong at the time and is quite wrong now in insisting that there were 600,000 armed VC/NVA troops available to the enemy at the time of the Tet Offensive. History, rather than bearing out Mr. Adams' contentions, would prove to any reasonable man that he was wrong.

Adams has contended in a *Harper's* magazine article and before the House Intelligence Committee that the "massiveness" of the Tet Offensive proves that MACV's and the total Intelligence Community figures for VC armed strength were grossly understated and that as a result, our forces were surprised at Tet; that 10,000 Americans were killed and 1,200 U.S. aircraft destroyed or damaged on the ground. These contentions are demonstrably not true, and the facts concerning the Tet Offensive offer proof. Estimates of the total commitment of VC/NVA forces in the Tet Offensive range between 67,000 and 85,000 troops. Neither Mr. Adams nor anyone else has ever challenged these estimates. That is not to say that those figures were unchallengeable, but even if we grant the possibility that they are 100 per cent too low and that attacking VC/NVA troops bordered on 170,000, the Tet Offensive indicates that figures of enemy strength provided by intelligence were too high, *not* too low. There was ample evidence at the time of the Tet Offensive that the enemy was really scraping the bottom of the barrel to increase the strength of his attack. VC/NVA were captured who had obviously been taken directly from the hospital and drawn into the fight with serious unhealed wounds from previous battles. We also know that the VC/NVA forces at the last minute rounded up villagers, including teenage boys and girls, to add to the weight of their attacks. Had the large pools of uncommitted armed strength suggested by Mr. Adams been available, this obviously would not have been necessary. We were not surprised by the fact of the Tet Offensive; we were not surprised by the "massiveness" of the numbers of troops committed. What surprised us was the rashness of the Tet attacks, which included as objectives major population areas where the enemy could not expect, and did not achieve, military success. Thus, the evidence from the Tet Offensive does prove that *all* estimates were wrong by being too high in terms of total VC combat strength available

and that the *worst* estimate around by far was Mr. Adams' 600,000. Had the Allied forces been attacked by a half million or more troops, one would have to give some credence to Mr. Adams. Since that was not the case, he could be given no credence.

With regard to Mr. Adams' allegations in *Harper's* magazine that 10,000 Americans were killed in the Tet Offensive and his allegation before this Committee that 1,200 aircraft were destroyed on the ground, it should be apparent that it is Mr. Adams, and not those whom he would accuse, who has an inclination to use phony figures to make a point. The facts are that during the Tet Offensive, a little over 2,200 Americans lost their lives, and about 58 U.S. aircraft were destroyed, and about 280 received some damage on the ground. And the aircraft were certainly not wing tip to wing tip a la Pearl Harbor, as Adams alleges. While I do not contend that these were insignificant losses, I believe it necessary to stress that Mr. Adams tends to distort grossly to make his accusations stick.

"Mr. Adams' figures were not rejected because of a conspiracy; they were rejected because his analysis was bad..."

Mr. Adams has alleged that General Creighton Abrams, General Westmoreland, Ambassador Bunker, and key officials of his own agency conspired to suppress his figures in favor of what he claims are phony figures. This conspiracy, he alleges, was designed to deceive the American press and public. His chief exhibit is a message from General Abrams to his superiors in Washington, which has been released to this Committee. In my view, any attempt to place General Abrams at the head of some conspiracy to deceive indicates a lack of rationality on the part of the accuser. Anyone even remotely familiar with the character of Creighton Abrams would pick another target for such an accusation. Further, if one reads the message in question, he will see that General Abrams is attempting to *prevent* phony figures, that is, Adams' figures, from being entered into Washington-level documents describing armed strength of the enemy; quite the opposite from defending phony figures!

I have pointed out earlier that history, in fact, strongly indicates that Mr. Adams was wrong. Let me say a few words about the reasons his numbers were rejected even before the historical evidence was in.

By his own admission, Adams was the only analyst at CIA Headquarters following VC strengths. There were at least thirty analysts in MACV Headquarters following this subject in far more detail. In addition, MACV had U.S./Vietnamese teams at the district and province levels throughout Vietnam specifically charged with providing estimates of guerrilla strength. Adams further admits that he based his analysis on VC documents alone. MACV analysts viewed these documents as well but were unwilling to place the heavy reliance upon them that Adams did. Many of these VC documents were reports of VC recruiters — called proselyters in their own terminology — reporting their success in organizing for the Communists the population of the district in which they worked. There was a strong tendency in all VC documents reporting to their superiors to overstate success. For instance, VC commanders would report numbers of U.S. and Allied armored personnel carriers destroyed in districts and provinces where we simply had no armored personnel carriers. Thus, to MACV analysts, VC documents were not an impeccable source of information on VC strength. We in MACV had no illusions about precision of the counts of guerrillas reported in this fashion. In fact, we tended to consider them, if

anything, too high. There was a natural inclination toward prudence in such counts from the field, since over-optimism regarding the guerrilla threat in one province or district could result in less attention to its security, and the men doing the reporting, both U.S. and Vietnamese, lived and worked there.

Mr. Adams' general approach was to take a VC document that suggested certain levels of strength in the VC apparatus in one district and multiply those numbers by numbers of districts. This, to MACV, seemed rather simple-minded and reflected a mechanical approach by a Washington-based analyst totally unfamiliar with the vast differences from district to district and province to province in Vietnam.

In sum, Mr. Adams' figures were not rejected because of a conspiracy; they were rejected because his analysis was bad in the view of most intelligence officers in Washington and in MACV. His views were rejected only after his agency gave him ample opportunity to present his thesis to other analysts. As events unfolded, Mr. Adams was, in my view, proved conclusively wrong. The biggest mistake that we made in MACV was to compromise with Mr. Adams and add 24,000 personnel to the VC/NVA order of battle on the basis of his arguments, thus making us 24,000 men more in error than we had been.

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It may well be that the only adherents to Adams' views of 600,000 VC ready to fight were in the enemy high command. They obviously expected a massive uprising to accompany their Tet Offensive. Perhaps they too were taken in by VC documents inflating their strength.

In my view, Mr. Adams does a hard-pressed U.S. Intelligence Community an enormous disservice by accusing its leaders and other prominent Americans of outright mendacity. He has long been on a vendetta against anyone who would not accept his unique and wrong-headed view of VC/NVA order of battle. The high point of his efforts was his much-publicized testimony before this Committee two and one-half months ago. I appreciate this opportunity to defend the reputations of the men he maligned.

About the Author

Lieutenant General Daniel O. Graham is retiring as Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. During his career, he spent over three years on the staff of the Director of Central Intelligence at CIA Headquarters. During the period of the Tet Offensive, he was the Chief of the Current Intelligence and Estimates Division, J-2, MACV.

Kissinger's Foot-Dragging Means Short Fuze on Sinai Watch Posts

WHATEVER HAPPENED to the U.S.-manned Mideast warning posts and sensor fields which have to be in operation by February 22nd as part of the Sinai II withdrawal agreement negotiated last summer by Henry Kissinger?

So little has been done to implement the program that about all the United States can hope to have in place then is "one man with a flag," according to one government official close to the problem. Another jokes: "It's really not that bad; we'll have 200 technicians in place, just as we agreed — they'll all be carrying empty flashlights."

The problem stems from foot-dragging by none other than Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who labored under intense pressure of shuttle diplomacy to negotiate the Egyptian-Israeli agreement of early September, but then paid scant attention to pleas from his own staff to formulate a vehicle by which the U.S. program, so vital to the accords, could be implemented. Specifically, a NSSM prepared for Kissinger's approval and the President's signature in late September — before Congress even ratified the accords on October 13 — floated around in Kissinger's briefcase crying for attention for almost six weeks. The memorandum, NSSM 230, was not signed until mid-November. Meanwhile during the period of inaction, State received ten or so unsolicited proposals from industry containing concepts for carrying out the U.S. commitment.

As a result of high-level sluggishness the industry competition needed to pick 200 technicians to man and install the Sinai sensor fields won't be formally underway before December 19, when Requests for Proposals will be issued. Even then, the ground rules industry needs to prepare the

responsive proposals won't be clarified until the State Department holds two "bidders' conferences," one on December 23 and another on December 30.

The short fuze this results in is evident; the timetable becomes so compressed that it borders on the ludicrous. Industry's proposals will be due on January 5, only six days after the 30 December bidder's conference (two of those six days being a weekend). The bids will be evaluated and an award made "not later than January 16," a State Department spokesman tells AFJ. That's ten days (including one weekend) to evaluate proposals for one of the most sensitive assignments American industry will ever have undertaken, one on which peace in the explosive Middle East literally may hinge. (Some estimates suggest the program means a contract worth about \$20-million in its first year.)

And, as the fuze grows shorter, the successful bidder will have until February 22 — less than 5½ weeks — to pick 200 technicians, move them to the Sinai, construct housing for them, install at least 3 (and possible 8 or more) separate sensor fields, and demonstrate their "initial operational capability."

Can it be done? AFJ doesn't know. Industry sources joke: "Sure, we can do it — just so we don't have to put batteries in the flashlights." ("Maybe that's what Henry really wants, blind sentries," another adds.)

Yet as late as December 9, the person who will oversee this vital task for the U.S. government was yet to be named; National Security Council and State Department staffers still weren't sure of how many sensor fields have to be installed; and a last minute site-survey needed to draft a meaningful request for proposal was still underway. (Uncertainty over the number of sensor fields stems from an ambiguous

clause in the accords which calls for "three electronic, unmanned sensor fields at both ends of each pass [the Mitla and the Giddi Passes], in the general vicinity of the [two other Israeli and Egyptian-manned] national surveillance stations and on the roads leading to them." That could mean three, six, or possibly eight or more sensor fields.)

Moreover, the Egyptian surveillance station has yet to be built in the Sinai or its sensors installed.

Support Group Activated

As this issue went to press, State has begun manning a small, 12-person Sinai Support Mission office on the Department's prestigious seventh floor. Its head, Clay McManaway, has appointed working groups of experts in communications and electronics to help draft the RFP and evaluate the proposals. But he is still waiting for someone to report to. NSSM 230 specifies that the group's director will also function as a "Special Representative of the President," reporting through the President's Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. A small "Inter-Agency Management Board" will assist him, composed of representatives from CIA, DoD, State, ACDA, and AID. By the time the group gets organized, it will have about two months left to solve a problem identified five months before the February 22 deadline ending the Sinai II Withdrawal Agreement, when Henry Kissinger promised that American technology would be ready to help secure peace in the Middle East.

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